



Covenant & Conversation

VA'ERA · ואֶרָא

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** 7"צ ז



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

Of Lice and Men

• The full essay written by Rabbi Sacks is available [on our website](#)

The third plague hit Egypt, and the dust of the land turned into lice. Pharaoh's magicians tried to recreate the lice, but they failed. As lice attacked men and animals, the magicians said to Pharaoh, "*This is the finger of God.*"

Too little attention has been paid to the use of humour in the Torah. Using satire, the Torah effectively mocks human beings who imagine they can rival God. It repeatedly shows us that when people defy God, they expose their own smallness. When rulers believe they can break free of God's authority, God just laughs.

A classic example is the Tower of Babel. The builders believe their tower will "reach heaven," but the Torah writes God has to "come down" to see it. From heaven's perspective, their greatest achievement is laughably small. **This is Divine humour, revealing the gap between human arrogance and reality.**

Satire also helps us understand the Ten Plagues. The ancient Egyptians believed in many gods, most of whom represented forces of nature. The magicians believed they could manipulate these forces. Magic, in the ancient world, played a role similar to technology today: it promised power and control. A civilisation that believes it can control nature will also believe it can control people. In such a society, freedom has no place.

By looking at the plagues through this lens, we see that they were more than punishments. They were demonstrations that the gods of Egypt were powerless. The River Nile, worshipped as the source of life, turns to blood. The sun, regarded as the greatest god, is eclipsed by darkness. These plagues reveal that **nature itself answers to a higher moral authority.**

The first two plagues also recall Egypt's crimes against Israel. The Israelites' baby boys were killed by Egyptians and drowned in the Nile. Therefore, the river and the

forces associated with birth turn against Egypt. The message is clear: reality has an ethical structure. When powers meant to sustain life are used for evil, they become agents of destruction. There is justice in history.

The Egyptian magicians tried to interpret the plagues in their own terms. Thinking Moshe and Aharon were simply rival magicians, they imitated the first two plagues, producing more blood and more frogs, completely missing the irony. In trying to prove their power, they only made the situation worse. But the third plague - lice - changed everything. The magicians fail to reproduce it. At once they admit, "*This is the finger of God.*" This moment introduces an idea still common today: a belief that God exists only where human explanation fails. When something cannot be scientifically explained, it must be Divine. As science advances, God is pushed further away.

In Judaism, we encounter God primarily through Torah, which teaches us how to build a society of justice, compassion, and human dignity. We've learnt that science does not displace God: it reveals, in ever more intricate and wondrous ways, the design within nature itself. Egypt's downfall comes through humour: the magicians who claimed mastery over nature cannot even create a louse. God reveals His presence in the smallest creature, mocking those who confuse power with greatness.

What the Egyptian magicians did not understand is that power over nature is not the point. It's how we use that power that counts. The lice were God's joke at the expense of the magicians who believed that because they controlled the forces of nature, they were the masters of human destiny. They were wrong. **Faith is not merely belief in the supernatural. It is the ability to hear the call of the Author of Being, to be free in such a way as to respect the freedom and dignity of others.**

Around the Shabbat Table



1. Are there times when we fall into the same trap as the magicians, assuming we've mastered what we haven't truly understood?
2. Why do you think the Egyptian magicians try to copy the plagues instead of stopping the plagues?
3. How does the idea that God mocks human arrogance appear in other biblical stories?

Takeaway Thoughts

Far from diminishing our religious sense, science (rightly understood) should enlarge it, teaching us to see "How great are Your works, O God; You have made them all with wisdom."



Exploring the Parsha

WITH SARA LAMM

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7" ז ת



The Parsha in a Nutshell

The *parsha* opens with Hashem revealing Himself to Moshe. He promises to free the Israelites through four expressions of redemption: 1. He will take them out of Egypt. 2. He will deliver them from slavery, 3. He will redeem them as His chosen people at Mount Sinai. 4. He will bring them to their own land, the land promised to the *avot* (our forefathers) generations earlier.

Moshe and his brother Aharon approach Pharaoh, asking him to release the people to serve Hashem. Trying to show them God's presence, Aharon throws down his staff, and it transforms into a snake. The magicians

turn their staffs into snakes too, but Aharon's staff swallows the Egyptian sorcerers' staffs. Pharaoh stubbornly refuses to listen to Moshe and Aharon every time they approach him, even though they warn him of the impending plagues. Hashem then strikes Egypt with the first seven of the Ten Plagues: the Nile turns to **blood**, **frogs** swarm the land, **lice** infest everyone, **wild animals** invade, **pestilence** kills livestock, **boils** afflict the Egyptians, and devastating **hail** rains down fire and ice. Despite all this, Pharaoh's heart remains hard and the people remain enslaved.



Parsha Activity

Fortunately/Unfortunately

First, one player begins a story with one sentence such as: "I went to the zoo." The player nearest to them adds a positive spin: "Unfortunately, all the animals escaped." Third person: "Fortunately, they were all vegetarians." Keep alternating between fortunate and unfortunate additions, and enjoy the power of flipping perspectives as the story gets more ridiculous.



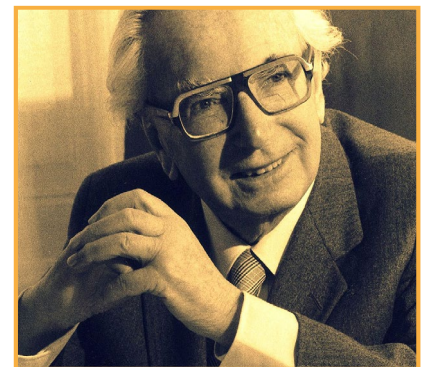
Laughter in Darkness

Viktor Frankl stood up in a Nazi concentration camp building site, watching his friend work beside him in silence. The horror surrounded them; terrible conditions, starving humans, and the constant threat of death. As Viktor looked around, he thought about what humans need, and how to help his friend. Then he made an unusual proposal: each day, they would each come up with a story they could tell one another about life after liberation. The more amusing, the better.

His friend had been a surgeon before the war. One day, as the foreman shouted 'Action! Action!' to speed up their work, Viktor turned to his companion with a grin. "Imagine," he said, "one day you'll be back in the

operating theatre, performing surgery. Suddenly, an orderly will burst in announcing the senior surgeon's arrival by shouting, 'Action! Action!'" His friend smiled, and in a place like this, a smile was a small but powerful victory. The game took hold. It sometimes seemed impossible. But Viktor had studied the human mind for years. He knew that humour was paramount!

Years later, in a warmer, safer place, he explained to others that humour was one of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. If you think about it, when you laugh about something, you are finding the ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds. In those dreadful and scary days in the concentration



camp, they had very few resources. But Viktor always knew, everything can be taken from a person except one thing: the freedom to choose one's attitude. He chose to keep hope - and humour - alive for himself and the men around him.

In the darkest moments, the ability to laugh wasn't escapism. It was resistance. It was choosing dignity when the world demanded despair. It was choosing to remain human.



Cards & Conversation

Moshe told this to the Israelites, but in the brokenness of their spirit and the brutal labour they did not listen to him.”

– Shemot 6:9

When Moshe tells the Israelites that God will free them, they don't listen.

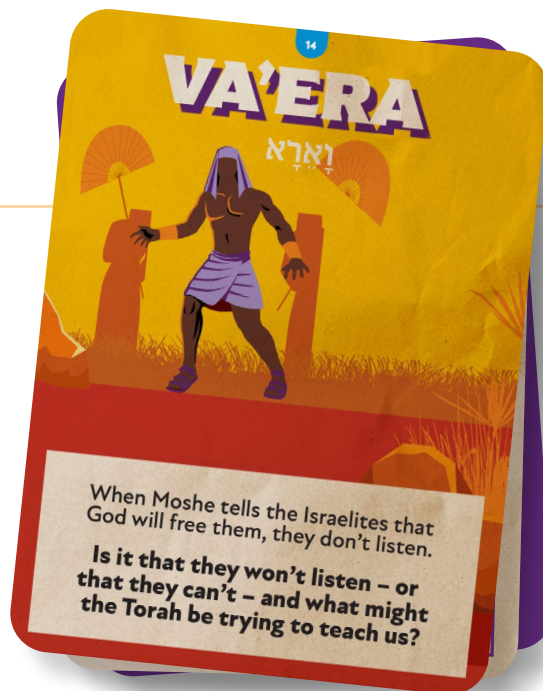
QUESTION: Is it that they won't – or that they can't – and what might the Torah be trying to teach us?

Rabbi Sacks on Shemot 6:9 (in the Koren Sacks Humash) offers an answer:

For us to climb to spiritual heights we must first have satisfied our material needs... If you want to improve people's spiritual situation, you must first improve their physical situation... That is one of the most humanising insights of Judaism. Alleviating poverty, curing disease, ensuring the rule of law, and respecting human rights: these are spiritual tasks no less than prayer and Torah study. To be sure, the latter are higher, but the former are prior. People cannot hear God's message if their spirit is broken and their labour is harsh.

Cards & Conversation: Chumash Edition is a new resource. On one side of every parsha card, you'll find an interesting question to think about and discuss, based on the Torah portion. Flip it over, and you'll discover an idea from Rabbi Sacks that shines a new light on the parsha.

We are pleased to offer a weekly sample of these cards here, and you can also download the full set, request a pack of your own, and find out more by visiting rabbisacks.org/cards-and-conversation



Parsha in Practice

Value of the Week

Humour and Humility
(Shemot 8:15)

When the Egyptian magicians couldn't create lice, they admitted: "This is the finger of God." But their confession came too late, as they acknowledged God only after they failed at creating something tiny. They had spent so much energy proving their greatness that they missed the point entirely. The humour Rabbi Sacks discusses in the main essay of the week teaches us something profound: true wisdom means recognising our limits before we're forced to. The magicians who could manipulate rivers couldn't handle a louse. Sometimes the most significant strength is admitting what we don't know.

Practically Speaking

How does humility work?

We live in a world obsessed with appearing capable and in control. We hesitate to say "I don't know" or "I need help" because it feels like we are admitting a weakness. But like the Egyptian magicians, this pride often makes things worse, not better.

Rabbi Sacks often quoted C. S. Lewis who said: "Humility doesn't mean thinking less of yourself. It means thinking about yourself less." Being honest about your limitations and finding humour in your mistakes rather than getting defensive allows us to recover and learn. The people who laugh at themselves grow faster than those who protect their ego at all costs.



Try it out

YOUNG STUDENTS:

This week, when you make a mistake, try laughing about it instead of getting upset or making excuses. Say out loud: "Well, that didn't work!" and see how it feels to be honest about messing up.

ADVANCING STUDENTS:

Over the coming week, try to notice when you're tempted to pretend you know something you don't, or to hide a mistake. Practice saying "I don't know" or "I was wrong about that" in conversation this week. See how humility opens doors that pride keeps closed.



Learning in Layers

Guiding you through Torah step by step, with insights from the [Koren Sacks Humash with translation and commentary by Rabbi Sacks](#). Each step takes us a little deeper and invites 'Torah as Conversation,' just as Rabbi Sacks taught.



What kind of freedom are we fighting for?

LAYER 1: LOOK AT THE TORAH TEXT: SHEMOT 8:16

"שְׁלַח עַמִּי, וְיַעֲבֹדוּנִי..."

LAYER 2: READ RABBI SACKS' TRANSLATION

..."Send My people forth, so that they may serve Me."

LAYER 3: THINK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS

Does this feel to you like an obvious contradiction – to free the people from their slavery in Egypt, in order to become servants of God? To understand the freedom Moshe and Aharon were fighting for (under the guidance of God) this is an important point to examine. What would their future look like? How would service to God be different, and better, than service to Pharaoh? Notice that these words are being repeated to Pharaoh himself.

LAYER 4: LEARN FROM RABBI SACKS' COMMENTARY

"The Torah does not frame the move from slavery to freedom in terms of the ability to **do whatever you like**. Rather, it promotes the freedom to **do what you ought**. That, for the intellectual architects of freedom in the modern world, such as John Locke, was the difference between liberty and license. Letting the people go – escaping tyranny – was not in and of itself a prelude to freedom. The key distinction throughout the Exodus narrative is not between slavery and freedom but between servitude to a human ruler and service to God, Creator of all. It is the second way that honours humanity, because it involves acknowledging as our sovereign the One who created each of us in His image."

And as Rabbi Sacks later notes in his commentary to Shemot 10:2, "The Divine plan, from the outset: was to tell a story about the liberation of slaves that would lead eventually to a civilisation based on freedom, justice, and human rights."

LAYER 5: REFLECT AND RESPOND

What does true freedom mean? The Exodus of Egypt – Yetziat Mitzrayim – teaches it's not about escaping all authority. It's about the difference between serving a human ruler who treats people as tools, and serving God who honours each person, knowing they were each created in His image. That distinction changes everything.

1. What's the difference between liberty and license, and why does that distinction matter for building a good society?
2. If the Exodus isn't primarily about freedom from slavery, what is it about?
3. How do you decide which authorities or rules deserve your respect and which ones don't?

● Find out more about the [Koren Sacks Humash](#) at rabbisacks.org/books/the-koren-sacks-humash

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

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